

that of the great Ceasars. Central and local government scarcely existed, direct taxation disappeared, and the majestic corpus of Roman law was replaced with barbarian custom.¹⁵ Economically the Roman Empire in the West was reduced to living from the land during the third century. Trade and commerce shrank and became localized, large industry ceased, towns dried up, and men fled to the country in order to eat and to survive.¹⁶ In this connection N. H. Baynes has suggested that the Vandal conquest of North Africa in the early fifth century gave the Vandals control of the vital narrows between Tunis and Sicily, permitting them to block trade between the eastern and western halves of the Mediterranean.¹⁷

Some of the chiefs such as Theodoric wished to preserve Roman culture but they did not understand it well enough to serve even as custodians. It has been contended, furthermore, that there was little culture to be preserved by the time the Germans occupied Roman soil. Intellectually and artistically Rome had long been waning. Regarding cultural decline, certain historians have concentrated on showing the obvious differences between Roman and German culture. The difference in art, for example, is quite striking.¹⁸ And in the sphere of religion some historians contend that there was also a revolution. The pagan religions and emperor worship were routed by Christianity. Worldly religions were replaced by an other-worldly faith which, according to Saint Augustine, taught that man should retreat from this world and become a member of the City of God, that man should fight the battles of God's world and not those of this world if he would attain salvation.¹⁹ W. C. Bark has supported most of these arguments in a recent attempt to refute the Pirenne thesis. It is, however, incomprehensible that he can picture the period between 300 and 600 as dynamic and as "the seedbed" of such modern concepts as the equality of women and the rights and dignity of labor.²⁰

To all the above arguments and theories could be added many more; but they would not help to clarify the wide divergence of opinion. How, then, can we answer the question when did the Middle Ages begin? The evidence available warrants no clear, decisive answer. It but warrants our answering that the Ancient World did not catastrophically end in the fifth century under

**THE MIDDLE AGES
IN RECENT
HISTORICAL
THOUGHT
SELECTED TOPICS**

By
BRYCE LYON
University of Illinois

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INTRODUCTION

To summarize even briefly the principal scholarly interpretations and debates held on each aspect of the historical period known as the Middle Ages would require a large book. This pamphlet, therefore, has been limited to subjects that always find their way into history textbooks for secondary schools, selected according to their importance in the Middle Ages and the author's competence in them.

Because so many erroneous opinions on the beginning of the Middle Ages still appear in textbooks and because medievalists themselves are yet so widely divided on this subject, it seemed the logical problem with which to begin. It is followed by a discussion of two institutions that took root early in the Middle Ages and dominated political and economic life almost down to the fourteenth century—manorialism and feudalism. Lastly examined are two subjects of a constitutional nature—Magna Carta and representative institutions. Appraisal of Magna Carta and institutions generally considered fundamental precedents for modern constitutional government seemed warranted by the great debate constantly waged over the value of constitutional government and the ordeals undergone by the western democracies in recent times.

THE MIDDLE AGES IN RECENT HISTORICAL THOUGHT

by Bryce Lyon

I. WHEN DID THE MIDDLE AGES BEGIN?*

The fall of the Roman Empire in the West, though one of the great catastrophes of history, did not occur in the manner often presented in introductory texts on the Middle Ages. There is no denying that the western part of the Empire was occupied by German tribes between the fourth and seventh centuries; that the majestic imperial political organization disintegrated; that trade, commerce, and industry waned; and that intellectually and culturally Rome ceased to create and began to forget her rich heritage. But what historians now realize and admit is that Rome did not decline and fall abruptly; she declined gradually, with each of her constituent elements crumbling at a different tempo. No longer can the teacher confidently assert that the Middle Ages began in 325 when the Roman Emperor Constantine moved his capital to Byzantium on the Bosphorus, in 395 when Theodosius died, in 410 when Alaric sacked Rome, or in 476 when the last emperor of the West was deposed by the German chief Odoacer. No longer can the teacher view the beginning of the Middle Ages as a long gloomy night of Gothic barbarism.¹ Thanks to painstaking research on this problem the teacher must recognize that the beginning of the Middle Ages is not easy to date and that it is beset by numerous complications.

Though for many years important qualifications had been made to the prevailing theory that Rome collapsed suddenly under the impact of gigantic German invasions during the fifth century,² it was not until some thirty years ago that the Belgian medievalist Henri Pirenne propounded a theory on the end of the Ancient World and the beginning of the Middle Ages that upset traditional

* *Editor's note:* The author has placed a selected list of readings in English at the end of the text (see pp. 28-29). Detailed bibliographical suggestions, both for English and non-English materials, are indicated at appropriate points in the text by numbers referring to notes located on pages 30-37.

historical conceptions and that has formed the basis of all subsequent discussion of this classic problem.³ In a series of articles and addresses which culminated in the book *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, Pirenne advanced the thesis that the Ancient World ended only after the Arab invasions of the seventh and eighth centuries had swept around the perimeter of the Mediterranean and had converted it into a Moslem lake upon which, as one Arab writer graphically said, the Christians could no longer "float a plank." This, Pirenne argued, had been accomplished by the last quarter of the eighth century and had destroyed the essential characteristic and lifeblood of the Roman Empire—its unity and coherence, resting upon control of the Mediterranean from the Bosphorus to the Strait of Gibraltar. For centuries the *Mare Nostrum* of the Romans had been the cement that held firm the great imperial structure; over its waters had passed trade and commerce, the Roman military and naval might, and the vital exchange of ideas. The Mediterranean unity of the Roman Empire had not, according to Pirenne, been destroyed by the German tribes that had occupied the western Empire. They had, in fact, admired the superior civilization and had labored to continue it; the German chiefs had mimicked the Roman emperors in dress and ceremony, had appropriated Roman government, had continued to use the *civitas* as the center of administration, had employed the gold coinage of Diocletian and Constantine, and had done what they could to preserve Roman culture. Though these German kingdoms had had no actual political ties with the eastern half of the Empire, they had still partaken of the Mediterranean unity and had enjoyed unbroken economic exchange with the East.⁴

The Arab conquest destroyed this Mediterranean rapport; political, economic, and cultural exchange ended. Except for the most tenuous of ties between Constantinople and a few Italian ports the Arabs had rolled down an iron curtain between East and West that remained down until the eleventh century. Henceforth it was the Crescent versus the Cross; Mohammed had made possible Charlemagne. The West which had always been parasitical, drawing upon the superior economic resources of the East, reverted to a land economy or, as Pirenne said, to "an economy of

no outlets." The Carolingian Empire of the eighth and ninth centuries was pushed away from the southern sea and became landlocked. Meanwhile political organization disintegrated, urban life disappeared, and culture almost passed from the stream of history. Men subsisted upon land through the system of economic exploitation called manorialism and eventually provided for the basic military and political needs of a primitive society by developing the feudal system.

Briefly, this is the provocative theory of Pirenne. If fundamentally valid, it postpones the complete fall of the Empire in the West until the latter part of the eighth century and makes obsolete other explanations that would place the decline two or three centuries earlier. For Pirenne, imperial survival hinged essentially upon control of the Mediterranean; relegated to historical limbo are such theories for the fall of the Empire as military anarchy in the third century, loss of morale and creative drive, early economic decay, and Rostovtzeff's argument that the middle class—the custodian of Roman culture—was drowned in the illiterate masses.⁵

Had Pirenne lived to elaborate his theory more soundly, he undoubtedly would have projected it less categorically. Much more evidence needed to be dug out of the records before his various theses could be regarded as completely demonstrated.⁶ Stung to their pens and desks by the brilliant, forceful, and persuasive arguments of this radically new approach to the beginning of the Middle Ages, medievalists at once joined the fray and are still busily appraising the Pirenne thesis. While Pirenne was working out his ideas, Alfons Dopsch was stressing the continuity of Roman civilization, arguing that it never completely disappeared but survived in the early Middle Ages and provided the basis for the revival of western civilization in the eleventh century. Dopsch saw no break in the fifth or eighth century and thus proclaimed himself to be at odds with both Pirenne and the old school. He was actually an adherent of the Romanist school of historians, primarily French, who argued that Roman towns had survived the fall of the Empire and were the nuclei of medieval towns which took form in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁷ More recently, Robert Latouche has adhered to the Dopsch thesis but with im-

portant qualifications. Though admitting a continuity of Roman civilization in the early Middle Ages, Latouche believes that it fluctuated. In contrast to a low point reached in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, a notable revival came in the eighth and ninth centuries under the dynamic direction of Charlemagne and under the economic stimulus of the Vikings after they had turned from piracy and pillage to trade and commerce. Latouche thus finds a sort of renaissance in western Europe at the very moment that Pirenne found civilization at its nadir.⁸ In appraising the Pirenne thesis, therefore, one has first to consider how telling is the evidence adduced by Dopsch and Latouche.

Another group of historians, concentrating upon the records pertinent to trade and commerce in the early Middle Ages, has concluded that there was as much trade on the Mediterranean between East and West in the Carolingian period as there was in the Merovingian period and earlier. F. L. Ganshof has shown that sea communications were never closed between Rome and Marseilles in the eighth and ninth centuries. R. L. Lopez has argued that the evidence on the decline of eastern trade is less convincing than formerly believed. Papyrus continued to be used by the papacy until the eleventh century, and silk was imported during the ninth and tenth centuries.⁹ Studies by other scholars, such as those of Michael Rostovtzeff and Ferdinand Lot, seem to substantiate this view.¹⁰ The suggestion has also been made that fluctuations in trade between the West and the Byzantine and Moslem East were due not to Arabic obstruction but to consumer demand and to shifting political and economic patterns in the East. Lopez proposes that the Germans did not import the eastern luxury items because their tastes were not as refined as those of the Romans or of men later in the Middle Ages.¹¹ Byzantine and Moslem rulers, it has been shown, occasionally refused permission to export goods to the West. D. C. Dennett, Jr. and Maurice Lombard have cogently argued that if commerce declined it was mainly that of western goods which were in little demand by the East. Lombard contends that the trade with the West carried on by Jews and Syrians in the early Middle Ages was exclusively a luxury commerce of importation.¹² A. R. Lewis has branded the Byzantine Empire as the power that destroyed the ancient unity

of the Mediterranean. It opposed trade with the Carolingians who, he contends, were denied access to the eastern Mediterranean. It was not the Arabs who bottled up the Mediterranean; they, so he argues, had no aversion towards trading with the Christians. More recently he has again taken issue with Pirenne by attempting to show that during the early Middle Ages there was trade and commerce in northern Europe centering about the North and Baltic Seas.¹³

Perhaps the most convincing argument thus far presented to negate Pirenne's denial of economic relations between East and West is that of Sture Bolin. He has stated that Charlemagne's change from gold to silver coinage is no indication that trade ceased with the East. He found that the silver coinage of the Carolingians was linked to the relative value of silver and gold in Moslem lands. When, for example, extraction of silver from certain Arabic mines was at a peak around 850 and the value of silver in relation to gold dropped in the Moslem world, in the Carolingian Empire the silver content of the penny (*denarius*) was increased to maintain its value. Bolin's discovery of other such coinage changes has led him to suggest that these adjustments would not have been made if there had been no commercial contact between East and West.¹⁴

Though all these arguments throw serious doubt on a sudden cessation of commerce in the West and between East and West, none has proven that there was a significant amount of trade and commerce either in the Carolingian or in the pre-Carolingian period. It was, in fact, minuscule by comparison with that of the Roman Empire at its height or with that of Europe in the thirteenth century. However one argues, the evidence shows a very low volume of trade and commerce in the early Middle Ages.

Finally, there has been considerable writing to show that the Empire in the West came to an end about the time of the fifth century. In nature the arguments are political, economic, cultural, and religious. The authors, in whatever direction they look, can see nothing but decay in the fifth century and a deep chasm between Roman and German civilization. Perhaps the German chiefs such as Theodoric and Clovis did mimic the imperial behavior, but their performance was pitiful, bearing faint resemblance to